

GLOBE EDITORIAL

## A reason to pass the farm bill

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HUNGRY FAMILIES are caught in a perfect storm of economic hard times and flagging food donations. To get enough to eat, they need a federal rescue mission.

High prices for food and fuel, as well as the mortgage crisis, are battering cash-strapped families. And while the demand at food banks is up, donations are down, so there may be a shortfall of 15 million pounds of food, or 11.7 million meals, according to America's Second Harvest, a national food bank network.

All this adds up to some 35 million Americans who are "food insecure," according to Second Harvest, meaning they live in households that can't buy enough nutritious food. And paychecks don't always provide protection, since many working parents earn too much to qualify for food stamps but still can't afford enough groceries.

Second Harvest is seeking more donations. But charities can't go it alone. The country needs action only Washington can provide.

Congress should pass the Farm Bill. The House has passed a version, but the Senate bill is stuck. That keeps food stamps trapped in a time warp where they provide too little help to manage today's food costs.

The meagerness of the minimum food stamp benefit - just \$10 a month - hasn't been adjusted for inflation in 30 years. This hurts the elderly and people with disabilities, whose buying power is just a third what it was when the benefit went into effect, according to a report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Even families of four who get the maximum food stamp benefit of \$542 a month can't afford a healthy diet in Boston, where the average monthly cost for nutritious groceries is \$645, according to a 2005 report by the Boston Medical Center.

Food stamp benefits are also being capped by the 1996 welfare reform law, which froze the way many benefits are calculated. Prior to 1996, families were allowed an income deduction for basic living costs that was pegged to inflation. But since 1996, the deduction has been frozen at \$134 for smaller families, so they get a smaller allocation of food stamps.

Both the House and Senate farm bills would update benefit amounts. And the bills would increase funding for the Emergency Food Assistance Program, a federal program that buys food and gives it to states to distribute through food banks.

But more food will flow only if the bill becomes law. Congress should prune the farm bill, weeding out excessive crop subsidies. But if lawmakers settle for an extension of current law, families will struggle.

Food banks can and do help. But tackling hunger requires action that will put more food on the nation's emptiest tables.